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Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 30 June 1997, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. GALUSKA (Czech Republic)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION

The PRESIDENT declared open the 1997 substantive session of the Economic and Social Council. He said that the continuation of the restructuring effort in the economic and social fields was more pressing than ever, now that the United Nations, under the direction of the new Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, had put into effect a first series of measures aimed at bringing it more closely into touch with the contemporary world and its problems. The initiatives proposed as part of Track Two of the reform process would be announced shortly. It was important that the Economic and Social Council should participate fully in the consideration of those proposals and in the implementation of the decisions to which they would lead.

General Assembly resolution 50/227 remained the instrument whereby the reform of the Economic and Social Council must be guided. Some of its important provisions could and should be implemented without delay. Substantial progress still needed to be made in the review and streamlining of the Council's subsidiary bodies. It was to be hoped that negotiations on the matter would be completed during the session. Some results had been achieved already in simplifying the Council's agenda but consultations should continue on the topic, as well as on the elimination of items which had become obsolete. To allow for continued advances, the consultations must take place in a climate of confidence and with determination to grasp the global problems of mankind through a strictly rational and sober approach.

One of the important tasks entrusted to the Council was the coordination and evaluation of the follow-up to the major international conferences organized by the United Nations. As the recent special session of the General Assembly on the implementation of Agenda 21 had shown, although views on the problems that stood in the way of sustainable development were growing closer together, agreement on remedial measures was far away. Agreement was absent also on the question of available financial resources. Informal consultations would be held on that important matter in the course of the session.

The topic of the high-level segment would be "Fostering an enabling environment for development". There were divergent opinions about the preconditions for such an environment. Complete agreement might not be

achieved, but it could nevertheless be hoped that the discussion would make it possible to find a field of agreement and would lead, as resolution 50/227 required, to the adoption of agreed conclusions. That would only be possible if the interventions took the form of a genuine dialogue. In addition, to enlarge the scope of the discussion, the Bureau had decided to invite a number of eminent persons, including representatives of the private sector, to participate in panel discussions to be held outside the regular meetings.

Lastly, the high-level segment must not obscure the importance of operational activities and coordination matters, which were also part of the session's agenda. If the discussions led to the adoption of a set of realistic and implementable resolutions on all those items, a major contribution would have been made to the reform of the Council.

Mr. DESAI (Under-Secretary-General in charge of the Economic and Social Departments) said that a number of particularly important events had taken place since the previous substantive session of the Council. Firstly, Member States had continued their debate on a development agenda which would define both a theoretical approach and an order of priority for United Nations action in the field of development. Secondly, the Organization was now entering the implementation stage of the major international conferences. That stage, as had been seen at the previous special session of the General Assembly, aroused quite as much interest as the conferences themselves and it was essential for the intergovernmental bodies and the Secretariat to equip themselves with the means of carrying out their mission in that regard successfully.

Lastly, the process of reforming the United Nations was gathering speed. In the economic and social field, in addition to the reforms undertaken on the basis of General Assembly resolution 50/227, a major restructuring had taken place with the decision, announced on 17 March 1997, to merge the three departments of the Secretariat formerly engaged in analytical, normative and operational activities, while at the same time integrating the technical support services for the Council into the Department of Conference Services. Without being a complete innovation, the merger was a response to felt needs, particularly in regard to the implementation of the conclusions of the major conferences. Although the preparation and consideration of general policy would continue to be carried out essentially in the functional commissions,

only the Council had the mandate to give the necessary directives to the funds and programmes responsible, on the basis of the major orientations defined in that way. That unified structure could be expected to enhance the Council's capacity to respond effectively to the so-called "new" problems registered at the major conferences.

The challenge, as far as the work of the session was concerned, would be to succeed in adopting agreed conclusions, as called for specifically in General Assembly resolution 50/227. The discussion would need to be very open and very flexible in order to facilitate consensus. To that end, plans had been made for panel discussions in which representatives of civil society, including the NGOs, would take part.

The informal dialogue with the heads of the United Nations funds and programmes would centre on funding for operational activities for development. The theme chosen for the high-level debate - fostering an enabling environment for development - had a macroeconomic dimension, with the question of financial flows constituting a specific sub-theme. The point there would be to prove that fruitful discussions could be held in the Council on macroeconomic questions.

The importance of the question of water resources, one of the two themes of the coordination segment, could not be overemphasized. Consensus had been reached on the matter at the special session of the General Assembly on the implementation of Agenda 21, and the Commission on Sustainable Development would take it up in 1998. In the case of the steps taken to promote gender equality, as a follow-up to the Beijing Conference - the second theme for consideration in the coordination segment - attention should be drawn to the Secretary-General's appointment of Mrs. Angela King, Director of the Service for the Advancement of Women, as a special adviser on the matter.

In the course of the session, therefore, the Council would be asked to face up to a number of challenges, not least the length of its agenda, and to demonstrate its new dynamism in the context of the reforms already sketched out in the development agenda. The Secretariat would certainly spare no effort to support it in bringing its work to a successful conclusion.

Mr. JIN YONJIAN (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) expressed confidence that the session of the Council would reflect the many positive changes resulting from the restructuring and revitalizing process. The Council had streamlined its agenda while at the same time ensuring that the important issues affecting social and economic development worldwide remained prominent. Its emphasis on a dialogue among the participants and on the involvement of civil society were also commendable.

The theme for the high-level segment was timely and of significant importance to all Member States. The question of the funding of operational activities, to be considered under item 3 of the agenda, was of critical importance and the Council's recommendations on it could have far-reaching implications for the development efforts of the United Nations system. The participation of all the executive heads of the United Nations funds and programmes reflected the value placed on the Council's guidance in that vital area. The two major topics to be debated in the coordination segment were also of interest to all the world's peoples. In its consideration of those items, and for the rest of its agenda, the Council could count on the full cooperation of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services.

The new Department, which integrated the major technical support services for the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and their subsidiary bodies with Conference Services, was determined to deliver improved services with greater accountability and cost-effectiveness. Through the synergy thus established, it would be in a better position to avoid duplication and to plan and monitor documentation. Lastly, the central coordination of conference-servicing resources would allow for their more flexible allocation, taking into account varying needs. All those efforts would be carried out in full collaboration with the various substantive Departments of the Secretariat.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (E/1997/100; E/1997/L.15 and L.21)

Adoption of the agenda

The PRESIDENT said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Council wished to adopt the agenda in document E/1997/100.

It was so decided.

Organization of work

The PRESIDENT proposed a number of changes to the provisional programme of work for the 1997 substantive session (E/1997/L.15): item 4 (a) would be taken up on 9 and 10 July and item 4 (b) on 11 July; two meetings would be devoted to item 5 on 16 July; item 8 would be taken up in the morning of 17 July and item 6 (c) on 18 July.

During the high-level segment, the President of the General Assembly and the Secretary-General of the United Nations would address the Council at the morning meeting on 3 July.

Mr. MEYER (Luxembourg), speaking on behalf of the European Union, expressed concern that the programme of work proposed for the afternoon of 23 July might be rather too heavy.

The PRESIDENT said that the Bureau would look into the matter.

Mr. MARRERO (United States of America) thought that any discussion of agenda item 8 could only be general and might well prove premature since the Secretary-General had not yet put forward his Track Two reform proposals.

The PRESIDENT said that the Council would have before it the Secretary-General's report on the question, which would not contain any recommendations. The Council would therefore restrict itself to a general discussion of the actions described in it.

Mr. DLAMINI (Observer for Swaziland) expressed the hope that all the documents would be made available to delegations sufficiently in advance to give them time to consider them. That would make the discussions more fruitful.

The PRESIDENT took note of the request and invited the Council to approval the provisional programme of work as orally revised.

Document E/1997/L.15 was adopted as revised by the President.

The meeting was suspended at 11.20 a.m. and resumed at 11.25 a.m.

OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION:

(a) COORDINATION OF ACTIVITIES ON A SYSTEM-WIDE BASIS: FUNDING FOR OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT: IMPLEMENTATION OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 50/227 (E/1997/68; E/1997/78)

Informal dialogue with the executive heads of United Nations funds and programmes

Mr. SPETH (Administrator, United Nations Development Programme) said he was glad that the Council's session was opening with an informal dialogue which offered an opportunity to stress the importance of close ties

between the normative work of the United Nations system and its operational activities. Pending the reform proposals to be presented by the Secretary-General, he would refer only to the progress already achieved in improving coordination of operational activities, both in the field and in regard to capacity-building.

Steady progress had been made for some time in channelling coordination efforts into achieving the targets set in support of country programmes. Three elements were particularly important in that connection: the Development Assistance Framework, common premises and services, and the Resident Coordinator system. The Development Assistance Framework made it possible to ensure the coherence of the support provided by the system as a whole in response to the needs of countries as defined in the Country Strategy Notes. That approach was soon to be tested in some 10 countries. The sharing of premises and services was a complicated matter, but it had been possible to establish a timetable for realizing that objective in the next few years. Lastly, the importance of the Resident Coordinator system had been strongly reaffirmed, as well as the need to take concrete measures to improve its management. A number of initiatives in that direction had recently been approved by the Executive Committee on Development Operations. Serious efforts had been made to select the best candidates in the light of each country's needs, and to ensure that the Resident Coordinators had acquired experience in different organizations: currently, 45 of the 153 Resident Coordinators had worked in more than one organization. The fact that, in accordance with the decisions of the General Assembly, it normally fell to the UNDP resident representatives to fill the office of Resident Coordinator put a heavy responsibility on the Programme; incidentally, its financial contribution to the system was some $100 million a year. Although the Resident Coordinator system was currently functioning better than ever - thanks, in large part, to the work done by Mrs. Sadik - there were still too many weak spots. Efforts would be made to remedy those in accordance with the informed guidelines suggested by the Council.

Capacity-building for the eradication of poverty should be at the heart of operational activities. The informal dialogue with the executive heads of United Nations funds and programmes and the dialogue that would take place in

a week's time with United Nations country teams should allow the Council to form a clear idea of the operational activities under way and help it to formulate its conclusions and recommendations in that area.

Mrs. SADIK (Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund) said that UNFPA was determined to contribute effectively to capacity-building rather than funding activities which were only sustainable with outside support. It was carrying out studies of countries' absorptive capacity and was participating actively in the work of the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions (CCPOQ), the United Nations Secretariat and other bodies with regard to national execution and capacity-building, in preparation for the triennial review. Experience showed, however, that there were penalties for moving too fast since, if Government was not ready for national execution, the burden often fell on UNFPA's lightly-staffed country offices, with a serious loss of efficiency.

UNFPA had played an active part in drawing up system-wide guidelines. As a follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, it was operationalizing three programme areas: reproductive health, including family planning and sexual health; population and development strategies; and advocacy.

UNFPA was motivated essentially by a concern for country-level coordination and the need for more relevant and timely assistance to countries. It was convinced of the need to streamline and simplify the number and complexity of guidelines, procedures and processes.

The reform of the United Nations development system was also a topic of great interest and concern. UNFPA had participated constructively in the reform process undertaken by the Secretary-General. It was an active member of the Sectoral Group on Development Operations which was continuing to work on programme harmonization. The members of the Group had already agreed on the principle of a United Nations Development Assistance Framework and harmonized budgeting, under which each organization would have its own programme identity and its own budgetary mechanisms.

UNFPA was in favour of strengthening the Resident Coordinator system. To ensure impartiality, the post should be separate from any individual

organization and the Resident Coordinator should be able to represent all mandates and issues equally well, especially those deriving from the 1990s international conferences.

UNFPA fully supported the principle of common services and premises and had worked with the other members of the Group to ensure its implementation in a businesslike manner. It hoped that the current reform exercise would serve to strengthen the system while maintaining the distinct identity of the various components.

Mrs. BERTINI (Executive Director, World Food Programme) said that the World Food Programme (WFP) had been engaged for some years in reforming its own organization. A new initiative had been launched in that connection in 1996. The essential features of the plan, to be completed by the beginning of 1998, were: the establishment of 11 regional offices, the increased delegation of authority to regional managers and country directors, the strengthening of field staff management skills, and the downsizing and restructuring of staff at headquarters.

Other reforms were also under way, including the implementation by WFP of the country programme approach and improved financial management. Another initiative was aimed at promoting WFP activities not just in the developing countries but among donor countries, where the aim would be to assemble more resources.

Regarding constitutional reform, she said that the revisions proposed by the WFP Executive Board had been reviewed in May by the FAO Council and recommended by it to the FAO Conference. They would be reviewed by the Economic and Social Council and, if approved, would come into effect on 1 January 1998.

Lastly, WFP supported the reform process started by the Secretary-General. It had taken an active part in the Track One reforms. It was an active member of the Executive Committee on Development Operations and the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs, and was taking part in the work on common premises and services. It had also contributed to strengthening the Resident Coordinator system, particularly in the field. Radical reforms must be made in the system to enable the Resident Coordinators to provide the best possible response to the needs of the peoples concerned.

Ms. BELLAMY (Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)) said that UNICEF was deeply committed to the reform process. Her own organization had developed a Management Excellence programme, which had established a clear set of principles and professional standards for all staff, clarified accountabilities and interrelationships between the headquarters and country and regional offices, streamlined oversight of programmes, increased effective field management and developed new programme and financial-management information capabilities. Further improvements included integrated budgets, increased electronic connectivity among offices, reduced cycle times for procurement and delivery of supplies, and adoption of the United Nations Integrated Management System. Implementation of field programmes and coordination with other United Nations bodies had become much more effective. All that had been done in less than two years within a zero nominal-growth budget.

However, structures should not be seen as the essence of reform, harmonization or collaboration. What counted was the improvement of operations at the field level - in the case of UNICEF, the test was whether the changes made significantly improved the lives of children.

The joint Development Assistance Framework was becoming a reality. Established in consultation with the authorities in each country, it set forth the major themes and sectors for achieving, at the country level, the goals set at recent international conferences. It had been tried out in Ghana and some invaluable lessons had been learned.

The Resident Coordinator system could be still further improved. It was a matter of widening recruitment, establishing and clarifying lines of communication and responsibility, eliminating potential conflict-of-interest situations, and developing a more systematic mechanism. The question of common premises should be examined in terms of cost-effectiveness. Overall, Track One was proceeding at a good pace and UNICEF was confident that the reforms would improve its working relationships with other United Nations bodies and lead to more effective programme delivery.

As its contribution to capacity-building, UNICEF had supported the Bamako Initiative, based on decentralization and the development of local management capacities in the provision of basic health services. Universal child immunization was focused on the development of national programmes.

Basic water and sanitation interventions were premised on local management through community committees. UNICEF was also supporting the development of tools for monitoring children's rights that could help failed or fragmented States to meet their reporting obligations to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

An important inter-agency collaborative exercise in evaluation and follow-up was the independent evaluation of Operation Lifeline Sudan, an example of a protracted complex emergency. UNICEF was working with a range of partners - WHO, the Aga Khan Foundation, Rotary International, and the World Bank among them - to develop practical indicators of the sustainability of immunization programmes; field testing would start before the end of the year.

In conclusion, she made a number of brief observations of a more general nature. First, the role and functioning of United Nations operational activities depended upon results at the country level. It was necessary therefore, to develop better performance indicators, define accountabilities more clearly and make greater use of best practices. Second, it was essential to update, simplify and make more relevant the system of rules, regulations and procedures currently in force in the United Nations. In particular, financial mechanisms were needed that would make it possible to work more easily with the Bretton Woods institutions. To do so, it was necessary to institutionalize the working relationships with those bodies and with the Governments represented both in the Economic and Social Council and on the Boards of the World Bank and the IMF which could play a key role in that regard. Fourth, an effort must be made to reach out to civil society, especially the private sector. Lastly, achieving all those goals would require additional resources.

Mr. AMORIM (Brazil) said that he would like to know what importance each organization attached to South-South cooperation, or trilateral cooperation, for example between a country of the North and two countries of the South. Like other participants, he felt the need for some intergovernmental mechanism that would determine priorities in such fields as reconstruction or development programmes with a conflict-preventive aspect. As matters stood, when there was a crisis, the Security Council was called upon, but after that each organization took its own decisions, without any

intergovernmental body deciding that a particular country or region should have priority. That was a decision of principle which would normally be the task of an intergovernmental body. The Economic and Social Council should play that role, which would help to revitalize it. He would welcome the comments of the Under-Secretary-General in charge of the Economic and Social Departments on the point.

Mr. MARRERO (United States of America) said that the General Assembly had already recommended an early exploratory review, to be prepared jointly by the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions, to assess mechanisms, programmes and relationships at the field, headquarters and intergovernmental levels, with a view to identifying areas in which communication, cooperation and coordination could be improved. He would like to know whether any progress had been made in that direction, whether any difficulties had been encountered, and when information on the results obtained could be expected. His delegation was very anxious that the project should be completed and, if there were difficulties in the way, it was ready to take all necessary steps to overcome them. Although he welcomed the harmony which seemed to reign in regard to the reforms, he believed that there were nevertheless some areas of concern and disagreement. He asked what problems were still not settled. Also, in respect of the Resident Coordinator system, he would like to know what weaknesses and what areas of disagreement there were, and how the process could be advanced.

Mr. ORJONIKITZE (Russian Federation) said that his delegation supported all the efforts of the funds and programmes to improve the effectiveness and coordination of their activities. He would like to know what prospect there was of increasing the resources available for operational activities. The Russian Federation was very much in favour of coordination in the field: accordingly, the Resident Coordinator system should be strengthened. He would like to know what difficulties there were in respect of coordination with the Bretton Woods institutions in particular, and what could be done to overcome them. Lastly, he asked the executive heads of the funds and programmes how they envisioned the role of their respective organizations within the framework of the restructuring of economic and social development assistance.

Mr. SPETH (Administrator, UNDP) said that, as far as the possible merger of the governing bodies of certain funds and programmes was concerned, it would be better to wait for the Secretary-General himself to put his proposals before delegations in the report to be published on 16 July 1997. He was sure, however, that the role of the Economic and Social Council ought to be more structured in the proposed reform, whatever it was, as the representative of Brazil had said.

There had been a marked advance in the coordination of field activities with the Bretton Woods institutions at country level, and both IMF and the World Bank had undertaken henceforward to support the operational development bodies in their efforts to eradicate poverty, decentralize activities and promote national execution. The dialogue with the World Bank in particular was increasingly important, since the Bank needed to become more familiar with the new techniques for capacity-building. Arrangements must be made for a division of labour and responsibility, for that clearly fell on the United Nations and UNDP.

In reply to the United States delegation, which had asked what specific improvements should be made in operational activities, he said that, for example, the post profile for the Resident Coordinator should be more specific. The task was not as simple as it seemed: in particular, a whole series of important steps had to be taken regarding the authorizations to be obtained, the relationship of projects to certain humanitarian operations, and so on.

In reply to the representative of the Russian Federation, who had asked what sources should be approached in order to have more money to spend on operational activities for development, he said that that was a vital question which the Council would be dealing with under another agenda item. Undoubtedly, there should be a marked increase in the ODA share of available resources and States should reaffirm their commitments to that effect.

Mrs. SADIK (Executive Director, UNFPA) said, in response to the questions about the state of South-South cooperation, that UNFPA had started two programmes in that connection which were already yielding results: a programme of establishing centres of excellence, and a partnership programme arranged by developing countries among themselves. UNFPA was also promoting

South-North cooperation: an adolescent reproductive health programme had been put into effect in the Caribbean, modelled on similar programmes in the United Kingdom.

On the question of the merger of the various governing bodies of the funds and programmes, she too felt that it should be left to the Secretary-General to announce for himself what he had in mind. She recommended, however, that practical steps should be taken to encourage participation by the countries of the South in joint sessions or meetings; for example, by paying their travel expenses.

On the Council's policy-making role, she said that, currently, the dialogue between the Council and the operational activities for development bodies was certainly improved but the Council still relied too much on the passive mechanism of having statements delivered to it. It should try to find a way of encouraging a genuine dialogue. Furthermore, the operational bodies had to report to a great many committees and commissions, which was not a very productive use of their time. There again, the Council should look for ways of making the mechanism more effective.

The representative of the United States had asked what problems remained to be solved at the operational level. It was not so much a question of actual difficulties as points that needed to be cleared up. In particular, the Resident Coordinator received his instructions from the system as a whole, meaning that objectives at the country level were not clearly defined. CCPOQ was responsible for directing occupational activities, and it was for it to issue clearer and more specific guidelines.

The idea of thematic groups should be further developed and given a greater role. They should be able to pass on to the persons responsible for field activities the priorities set by international conferences, in respect of reproductive health, for example, or gender equality. The groups should also be in a position to ensure that activities were coherent, because that was not always the case at the level of orientation.

Henceforward, the evaluation of UNFPA field activities would be carried out jointly with IMF and the World Bank. However, the results did not always make it possible to say how the available funds could best be used.

Ms. BERTINI (World Food Programme) said, in response to the Russian delegation, that WFP relied increasingly on local procurement, which

had many advantages: making it possible to provide the population to be assisted with the food supplies they were used to, economizing considerably on transportation costs, and so on. In addition, and again with a view to promoting South-South cooperation, the previous session of the Governing Board of WFP had come out in favour of national food aid programmes: WFP would provide the services of experts but the food supplies would be provided by the beneficiary countries. In that way WFP was working to build capacity in the field.

The Economic and Social Council should undoubtedly retain a central role in policy-making, though it should confine itself to establishing major principles. A body such as WFP should be given full freedom to organize the action to be taken with the countries concerned.

On the question of structural reform, raised by the representative of the United States, she said that it was necessary above all to avoid conflicts of interest. The Resident Coordinator should speak on behalf of the United Nations and not of any particular operational body. On the question of the volume of resources, raised by the Russian delegation, she recalled that, in 1996, WFP had established a long-term resources forecast to make the situation more transparent to the contributors. However, many donors continued to make tied contributions, which considerably restricted flexibility. WFP needed to succeed in establishing a sufficiently convincing system to persuade States to increase their contributions. Both reflection and dialogue were needed in that connection, since financing was satisfactory when WFP had to deal with humanitarian emergencies but less so when it tried to plan for the long term. Perhaps it would be necessary to envisage making internal transfers.

It had been difficult to establish cooperation with the World Bank because the Bank was not used to working in emergency situations. However, the difficulties were gradually being overcome.

Ms. BELLAMY (Executive Director, UNICEF) said that the number of ratifications of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was rising steadily, which she regarded as proof that UNICEF's activities continued to arouse active interest in the great majority of States.

On the question of possibly merging the governing bodies of various funds and programmes, she said that UNICEF was already more or less prepared

for that, since it worked in close cooperation with many of them and found the feedback from such contacts very useful. Such a regrouping, however, should be taken as an opportunity to increase the number of informal meetings and contacts, since they were more fruitful than formal ones. It was also important to keep discussions regarding children as apolitical as possible.

The United States representative had talked about "problems" remaining to be solved. In the case of UNICEF, it was more a question of challenges to be met: for example, when it was necessary to accommodate to programming cycles. Questions such as common premises and services, so as to combine the necessary purchases, could certainly be settled, even if the same solutions could not be adopted immediately everywhere.

The definition of the Resident Coordinator's functions still raised questions. UNICEF's view was that the person concerned should be the tool of the system. Therefore, his powers needed to be more closely defined, as well as his position in the hierarchy and his channels of communication with it. Substantial progress had already been made in that direction.

The amount of resources for development continued to dwindle and the fault lay in certain harmful obstacles or trends: the economic difficulties being undergone by many donor countries; the custom which had arisen of asking them for multi-year commitments; the steady advance of bilateral assistance. Action must be taken to stem those trends. For example, it would be to the advantage of the various bodies to adopt the same accounting and evaluation procedures.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.